

Oral Presentation

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On behalf of Navy chaplains, thank you for the opportunity to provide our ministry to the personnel and families of our Armed Forces. We consider this access to our people's lives, sharing their deployments, dangers and satisfactions in the name of God, to be a high privilege, to be exercised with utmost care, respect, and diligence. Our Navy Chaplain Corps has been providing this ministry, serving directly with our military people in the field, since the Continental Congress first authorized naval chaplains in 1775, 228 years ago. We pray that we may continue this precious heritage, faithfully invoking the presence and power of God, as an incomparable resource among our people, for many years to come.

In recent years, several of the helping professions—chaplain, medical and mental health, and social work—have come to understand much better those dynamics experienced by our veterans who have prepared for, and encountered, hostile environments, combat, and trauma. Several scholars, such as Jonathan Shay, have helped us recover the truth that such dynamics have always applied to warriors. Various rituals of cleansing, talking, absolving, restoring, and renewing have been helpful traditions among warriors of many times and places, from Greek hoplites, to Roman legionnaires, to Medieval knights, to Native American braves, and now, to modern American veterans.

Chaplains since the Vietnam years have been involved in several responses to the issues faced by warriors, who find that their very souls have been seared and changed by their experience of combat and trauma. CREDO was founded in 1971 as a retreat ministry offered to

active-duty veterans returning from Vietnam. Interdisciplinary SPRINT teams have intervened in several crisis situations. Chaplains have also been involved in Critical Incident Stress Management programs, including debriefs of personnel. We active duty chaplains recognize that our presence is most valuable near the front lines, offering the ministry of presence as God's representatives standing alongside those in danger, giving them sustenance, strength, and solace. For those displaying symptoms of distress, we work with our professional colleagues to offer some spiritual first aid and comfort, and a gentle guiding hand through those doors leading to more specialized and intensive help—and hope—for tomorrow. And for all those that have faced trauma: we offer a ministry that we believe can make a positive difference for their future health.

The Warrior Transition program, provided by chaplains at the invitation of the U.S. Marine Corps following Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, offers what we believe to be a somewhat modest, but very valuable, ministry for those on the road back to their normal lives in society. In this program, given as they prepare to return home, we thank and affirm our veterans. We help them look at the changes that have happened in their own hearts and souls as a result of their experiences. We model for them the value of a debriefing experience as a means of understanding and healing. We call this a mental and spiritual wash-down, making it an experience of normative maintenance, rather than repair of something broken. We train them to recognize, renounce, and recover from those attitudes and actions whose toxicity causes the long-term destruction of one's own character, including berserking, violations of what's right, and dehumanization of the enemy. And we encourage our warriors to seek, intentionally, an integrated balance in life of positive physical, mental, and spiritual practices.

To date, our surveys of those who go through the Warrior Transition program have shown approval and appreciation of our efforts. Consistently, well over 90% of Marines who go through our program would recommend the program to another Marine. We have, so far, some positive anecdotal observations of how our warriors, following our program, are doing back home. Again, our program is modest. We may not work wonders in our sixty- to ninety-minute program (though God may!). But we can accomplish some valuable things to help our veterans. It is our moral obligation to do so. We do this from a powerful perspective of Divine belief, and spiritual reality, that we wish to make available to every veteran. We are trained to make such an offer in such a way as to completely respect each veteran's own beliefs. Many, we believe, will find this offer beneficial.

For any program seeking to deal with trauma, it's essential to include this spiritual component that chaplains best offer, working with other professionals as cooperative colleagues, for the sake of our veterans. Such is our hope; such is our prayer; and such is our plan, with God's help.

Thank you, from the heart, for this opportunity to share our story. May God bless you in your mission. And may God bless America, and those who serve her together, one nation, under God!